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E.O. 12958: DECL: 2019/12/18

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CI](#)

SUBJECT: Frei's Long Odds: Why the Numbers Point to a Pinera Victory in Chile

REF: A. SANTIAGO 943; B. SANTIAGO 897; C. SANTIAGO 1234

CLASSIFIED BY: Carol Urban, DCM, State, US Embassy Santiago; REASON: 1.4(B)

**¶11. (C) Summary:** At first glance, former president and Concertacion candidate Frei seems to be heading in to the final stage of the presidential election with a strong advantage: three progressive presidential candidates split 56% of the vote, while the only conservative candidate, Sebastian Pinera, received 44% of the vote. However, a closer examination reveals that Frei is not likely to be able to capture all of those progressive votes--particularly from supporters of Marco Enriquez-Ominami--and that Frei will have very difficult time gaining the votes he needs in the January 17 runoff to return to Chile's presidential palace. End Summary.

Liberals 56%, Conservatives 44%?: Not So Fast

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**¶12. (U)** At first glance, Chile's center-left appears to have come out on top in the first round presidential election. Eduardo Frei, Jorge Arrate, and Marco Enriquez-Ominami are undeniably all progressives, and all have roots in the Concertacion. Together, the three candidates garnered 56% of the vote, soundly beating the votes for the only conservative candidate, Sebastian Pinera, who received 44% (Ref A).

**¶13. (C)** However, Frei is highly unlikely to be able to capture the majority of these progressive votes in the January 17 runoff. Arrate's voters, who tend to be firmly anti-Alianza, will overwhelmingly vote for Frei, but Arrate received just 6% of the vote. In contrast, Enriquez-Ominami--who garnered 20% of the vote--drew support from a wide variety of voters, including many who were attracted by the candidate's strong pro-change message. Such change-minded voters are hardly likely to enthusiastically back Frei who, as a 67-year-old former president and son of a president, symbolizes the stagnant politics that Enriquez-Ominami was campaigning against. Indeed the latest poll from the Centro de Estudios Publicos (CEP), released in November (Ref B), showed that, among Enriquez-Ominami supporters who named a preference in a hypothetical Frei vs. Pinera runoff election, 43% of said they would vote for Pinera while 57% would vote for Frei. (Sixty-eight percent of respondents named either Frei or Pinera; 32% said they didn't know or would not cast a ballot.)

14. (C) According to embassy calculations using first round vote totals and indications from CEP poll results, Pinera is heading into the final stage of the presidential campaign with a five point lead over Frei in the second round vote. Assuming that Frei retains all of his first round votes (just over 2 million), gains all of Arrate's votes (430,000) and 57% of Enriquez-Ominami's votes (800,000 of Enriquez-Ominami's 1.4 million), he would receive almost 3.3 million votes in the second round. Yet Pinera received nearly that many in the first round--3.05 million. If Pinera were to retain all of his votes plus receive 43% of Enriquez-Ominami's votes as well (600,000), he would receive nearly 3.7 million votes. In essence, Pinera is heading into the last month of the presidential election with a nearly 400,000 vote lead over Frei -- a very substantial head start given that there were only 7 million valid votes cast.

15. (C) The Concertacion is working hard to win Enriquez-Ominami's support for Frei, but so far has achieved little. In addition to campaigning against the Concertacion status quo, Enriquez-Ominami

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feels that he was poorly treated by the Concertacion in general and the Frei campaign specifically when he first suggested that the coalition hold a primary election to choose a presidential candidate. (In contrast, Enriquez-Ominami is said to have developed a good personal relationship with conservative candidate Sebastian Pinera, and to once have stayed up late into the night talking with the Alianza candidate when both candidates happened to stay at the same hotel while campaigning in rural Chile.) Enriquez-Ominami's economic advisor, Paul Fontaine, has publicly joined the Pinera campaign. And other key Enriquez-Ominami advisors are trying to extract a high price from President Bachelet in order to "facilitate" Enriquez-Ominami's possible support for Frei. The Enriquez-Ominami camp would like President Bachelet to adopt several of their campaign platforms--including electing rather than appointing intendentes (regional leaders, similar to governors of U.S. states), tax reform, and re-directing mining revenue--and to immediately send draft legislation on these items to Congress. (Bachelet has not yet responded.)

16. (SBU) While Enriquez-Ominami wasn't expected to endorse either candidate, his election night speech was particularly bleak and may encourage his supporters to stay home. The 36-year-old parliamentarian said that both Frei and Pinera "represent the past" and not the future, and said "neither is the expression of a better country." Enriquez-Ominami voters, many of whom were already discouraged by the political climate, may stay home or cast spoilt ballots rather than give either Frei or Pinera their vote. And given that they tend to favor Frei, this may further hurt the Concertacionista.

Glimmers of Hope for Frei?

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17. (SBU) In a December 14 discussion, pollster Marta Lagos seemed to suggest that there was a chance for a Frei victory by noting that support for center-right candidates has traditionally topped out at 49% of the votes. However, she allowed that Pinera has a

very good chance of winning. In her view, the bigger question is whether he would do so by winning a sizeable share of the "change" voters from Enriquez-Ominami, or whether disaffected center-left voters will abstain or cast blank ballots.

¶18. (SBU) The most optimistic analysis of Sunday's results for Concertacionistas focuses on the parliamentary race rather than the presidential race. Because all of the seats in the Chamber of Deputies were also up for election, looking at how Chileans chose to cast their ballots in those races provides another optic for understanding the political mood of the country. Aggregating the results of each Chamber race across the country reveals that 44% of Chileans voted for a Concertacion candidate, compared to 43% for Alianza. (Independents and minor parties make up the remaining 13%--see Ref C for more details.) Progressives trying to paint a sunnier picture of Frei's chances have been rallying around this number. In their eyes, the 14% gap between the nearly 30% of voters who supported Frei and the 44% who voted for a Concertacion candidate for deputy are likely Enriquez-Ominami voters who can be persuaded to vote for Frei in the second round. Concertacion insider Enrique Correa expressed hope to the Ambassador December 16 that if the newly elected members of Congress go campaign for Frei, they could persuade some of these voters to back Frei in the second round.

¶19. (C) However, even within the Concertacion, few people seem to take this line of thinking seriously. It is an open question how many of these 14% who backed a Concertacion candidate for deputy but chose not to support Frei in the first round can be persuaded to vote for Frei in the second round. And even if the Concertacion succeeded in convincing all of these split-ticket voters to back Frei on January 17, the campaign would still be 6 points short of victory. As progressive think tank director Maria de los Angeles Fernandez commented to Poloff, there is a certain element of the

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Concertacion that is either in denial about Frei's chances or trying to prevent others from becoming so demoralized that they don't support Frei and his support falls further. Even Enrique Correa, who earlier in his December 16 conversation with the Ambassador had suggested that Frei could try and capitalize on the Concertacion's slim majority in congressional votes, later seemed resigned to a Frei loss. He said he hoped that the Concertacion could remain energetic in its support of Frei and avoid a landslide for Pinera, noting sadly, "it also matters how we lose."

Comment

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¶10. (C) Eduardo Frei faces the challenge of his political career in attempting to turn the tide of support for Sebastian Pinera and woo anti-establishment Enriquez-Ominami supporters. Barring a big gaffe by Pinera--which his campaign has successfully taken pains to avoid thus far--it is difficult to see how this is possible. Although technically more than a month separates the first round election December 13 from the second round election on January 17, campaigning will essentially cease for the last two weeks of December as the candidates and the public turn their attention to Christmas and the New Year. Frei, who has not used the first week after the December 13 election very productively, will have essentially two weeks in early January to win support from hundreds of thousands of Chilean voters in order to win the election--a tall order indeed. End Comment.

SIMONS